



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

Statement on Syria to the Security Council
New York, 25 July 2016

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Mr. President,

Every time I have briefed this Council, I have described the horrors of a brutal conflict characterized by the complete failure to protect civilians, which has generated gargantuan levels of suffering for most civilians. Truth be told, words are not adequate to depict the grim and gruesome reality for the people of Syria today. We have seen the hopes of ordinary Syrians for an end to their nightmare raised and then dashed time and again as the Government, non-State armed groups, and terrorist groups have relentlessly continued on a military path that has further devastated cities, towns, communities, and families. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recently said, “The number of war crimes already committed surpasses our worst nightmares”.

Fighting and violence have escalated across several parts of the country over the last few weeks resulting in widespread civilian deaths, injury and displacement. Strikes, by all sides, continue to be launched on and from heavily populated areas from air and ground without regard for civilian presence. Attacks on other civilian infrastructure remain an almost daily occurrence in some areas. A recent World Health Organization (WHO) report indicated that healthcare is attacked in Syria more than any other place on earth.

The undeniable fact is that, today, in many places, civilians in Syria are as much at risk as they have ever been, due to the parties’ continuing blatant disregard for international humanitarian law, whose primary and overarching principle, as advocated by but also supposedly enforced by the Security Council, is under the obligation to protect civilians from the effects of armed conflict.

Mr. President,

I am deeply alarmed by the disturbing developments in and around Aleppo city. Hundreds of mortars, missiles and projectiles were launched on both eastern and western Aleppo in past weeks, resulting in scores of deaths and hundreds of injuries. Since 7 July, civilian, humanitarian and commercial movements in and out of eastern Aleppo city have come to a halt. Castello Road, the last remaining access route in and out of the east of the city as I alerted you in my two



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previous briefings, where an estimated 250,000-275,000 people reside, has now been cut off due to fighting. The United Nations and our partners pre-positioned stocks in sad, but all too real, anticipation of such developments; food in east Aleppo is expected to run out by the middle of next month. While medical supplies are available for a longer period, I am extremely worried about the continuing attacks on medical facilities in eastern Aleppo, such as a hospital in Al-Maadi neighbourhood which has now been hit three times in the last month alone. Indeed, over the last 48 hours, we have received reports – in the process of being verified – of attacks on or near several facilities in Aleppo city and countryside. These attacks have a devastating multiplier effect, not only killing people and destroying facilities, but leaving thousands unable to get even basic care at a time when they need it most.

I cannot stress enough how critical the situation is for those trapped in eastern Aleppo city. This population is at serious risk of besiegement as the fighting closes in and their access to basic necessities runs out. Our highest priority is to ensure access through both cross-line or cross-border operations under the Security Council's existing Resolutions so that we can replenish stocks and ensure people's access to the basic necessities of life. The international community simply cannot let eastern Aleppo city become yet another – and by far the largest - besieged area. This is medieval and shameful. We must not allow this to happen. But, the clock is ticking. I urgently call on the parties, and those with influence, to act now to establish a weekly, 48-hour humanitarian pause for eastern Aleppo city so that the UN and partners have safe, regular and sustained access to the quarter of a million people trapped behind the front lines. This must be a full United Nations call – not just from me as the UN's humanitarian chief – this has to come from you, the Security Council.

Mr. President,

I am equally alarmed by reports of deteriorating humanitarian conditions and urgent medical evacuation needs in Madaya, Foah, Zabadani and Kefraya, where over 62,000 people are and continue to be besieged. Despite approvals granted by the Government of Syria over the last three months for the UN and humanitarian partners to provide assistance to besieged civilians in the Four Towns, the UN and partners have not been able to access the towns because of tension amongst parties to the agreement, heavy aerial bombardment in Idlib, and shelling on Foah and Kefraya.

We should all remember the disturbing images of starving children in Madaya earlier this year, many of whom have died even after aid was finally allowed in. Let me be clear: we will see such images again unless the parties enable immediate and unconditional humanitarian deliveries to the Four Towns. This is no hollow warning – this is highly likely to occur again unless you enforce access.



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Urgent medical evacuations must also be immediately available where needed. The current tit-for-tat arrangement - which has led to children dying in one of the towns because there is no equally sick child in another location to evacuate at exactly the same time - should be a shameful blot on the conscience of the parties and those who support them. In any event such a callous tit-for-tat arrangement is not in compliance with international humanitarian law – the only measure for humanitarian access and action is to meet needs, not reciprocity. I call on all parties to allow the sick and wounded to exit the Four Towns and all other besieged areas to get the medical care they need to survive and put an end to the tit-for-tat approach. Medical evacuations are not a question of politics or military advantage, but of basic humanity.

Mr. President,

I have highlighted Aleppo city and the Four Towns today, but you will find similar conditions in many more places: the tens of thousands trapped and exposed to fighting in Menbij with no humanitarian support or the reports of dozens of civilians killed in strikes in Tokhar in rural Aleppo; the continued bombardment of Douma, Darayya and Khan El-Shieh in Rural Damascus; and relentless ISIL attacks on the besieged parts of Deir ez-Zor city. I am also gravely concerned about the situation at the Berm along the Jordanian border, where the number of people, seeking shelter from the fighting inside Syria, has increased exponentially in recent months. The vast majority of those stranded are children, women, elderly people, as well as those in need of medical care, including hundreds of pregnant women. It is baking hot, totally arid, a no-man's land of a barely living hell.

The fact is, Mr. President, that across Syria, around 5.5 million people are in need in hard-to-reach and besieged areas with little physical protection and limited access to basic life-saving assistance. Of that number, some 590,000 people remain totally trapped in besieged areas.

Let me take a moment to describe what it is actually like to live in these areas. Most of these people are completely desperate for an escape from the constant fighting, shelling and snipers that engulf their lives. Parents have no food for their near starving children. Malnutrition so severe, that children die as a result. No running water or electricity. Prices for the little commodities that reach these areas are dozens of times higher than in neighbouring communities and thus simply not affordable for those already reduced to nothing. They are places with little education, where sexual violence, child recruitment and early marriage are commonplace. Imagine a place where a pregnant woman cannot give birth safely because she cannot receive the necessary pain killers or care that is needed. Places where those fortunate enough to find care all too often die in their beds when their medical facility is hit. And yes, in Syria, unspeakable sexual crimes against children – it's abhorrent and on our collective watch.

When you look beyond the numbers, Mr. President, this is the reality that people are facing in



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these areas day in and day out. It is not the fighters or those at checkpoints who are suffering and dying in such ways. It is the civilian population, the most vulnerable, children, women, disabled and the elderly. These are indisputable facts. And they speak for themselves. Surely none of us, none of you are immune to these horrors that constitute daily life for so many of our fellow human beings who just happen to have been Syrian, in Syria, when their world exploded around and over them over 5 years ago.

Mr. President,

The life or death situation in many parts of the country is exactly why we press from every possible angle to get regular and sustained access to all besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

It is true that some progress has been made this year. Overall, we have now reached over one million people in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. We have reached each besieged area at least once this year, including 400,000 of the 590,000 people living in besieged areas; including through on-going airdrops to 110,000 people in Deir-ez-Zor city. Significant progress was made on approvals by the Government of Syria for the July inter-agency convoy plan, with 34 out of 35 locations approved for convoys, including, for the first time, all requested besieged areas with the full package of assistance. These breakthroughs - however incremental - are proof that when there is enough political will, it is really possible to reach people in desperate need of life-saving assistance. I thank those with influence on the parties for bringing their weight to bear on the issue, especially recent initiatives by the United States and the Russian Federation, not least the Russian Federation's Ambassador and his team in Damascus.

At the same time, we have to recognize the enormous access challenges still in front of us. The escalation of fighting and insecurity continues to further constrain access. Beyond Aleppo and the Four Towns, we have seen this very clearly in July, as even with Government of Syria approvals, we have been unable to reach many other locations, such as Darayya and Douma, due to bombing and shelling and fighting along key access roads. UN and partners cross-border operations from Turkey and Jordan have also been affected by insecurity along border areas and key access routes, affecting our ability to reach tens of thousands of people.

Arbitrary restrictions and obstructions continue to limit or obstruct where we deliver aid, to whom and how often. Notwithstanding the high level of approvals for the July inter-agency convoy plan, the Syrian authorities only authorized us to deliver to 75% of the UN's estimated population in these areas. The team on the ground continue to press for the delivery of aid based on independent UN needs assessments, as called for by this Council in its resolutions

Even when approvals are granted and the large amount of paperwork is completed, permits given by the Government centrally do not always translate down to their security forces. In particular,



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despite repeated calls for the free passage of all medicines and surgical equipment in aid convoys, from this Council and others, medical and surgical items continue to be excluded or removed from midwifery kits, paediatric kits, and diarrhoeal disease sets, depriving thousands of people each month. This deliberate denial of essential medicine and surgical equipment undermines the very basis of humanitarian action.

Meanwhile, some non-State armed groups have also attacked, threatened and refused to cooperate with humanitarian workers. And sustained UN access to areas under the control of ISIL – such as parts of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates - remains extremely limited.

Mr. President,

Throughout Syria, UN agencies and NGO partners continue their tireless efforts to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of the Syrian population often at great personal risk. We saw this first hand on 29 June, when during a convoy to Arbeen and Zamalka, one of the drivers of a supply truck was shot in the chest and another round struck an armoured vehicle. I would like to recognise the bravery of those who risk their lives every time they cross conflict lines, borders, or enter active conflict areas to provide much needed life-saving assistance to those in need and to remind those who sometimes carp that gaining the Government of Syria's permission is the only way to mitigate these live and present mortal dangers to our brave UN colleagues and their partners, many of them local Syrians.

Collectively, through these efforts, we are reaching millions of people per month through regular programming, cross-border and cross-line activities, as well as air operations. It is vital that all humanitarian organizations, personnel and other assets– no matter where they are based, where they are operating, or how they deliver assistance in Syria – are provided all necessary protection by all parties to the conflict, as afforded under international humanitarian law.

Mr. President,

Let me be frank: we need to urgently regain the momentum on protection and access. The momentum created in the first half of the year, and since the creation of the ISSG Humanitarian Task Force, must be the platform for a step change in the protection and access situation for civilians into the second half of the year. This must include:

- A restoration and consolidation of the cessation of hostilities; an end to indiscriminate attacks that recklessly kill and injure civilians. It is well within the power of all parties – and those who back them – to minimize civilian casualties and avoid further crimes and atrocities. They must do so. Civilians and civilian infrastructure are not pawns to be sacrificed, but are specially protected under international law.



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- All necessary action from the parties and their supporters to ensure safe, sustained, unhindered and unconditional access. This must include humanitarian truces and pauses in the fighting so that we can reach those civilians trapped behind the front lines and they can reach life-saving services not available in their areas. Better still, of course, is for all the fighting to stop.
- An immediate end to the sieges which still collectively punish hundreds of thousands of civilians mercilessly. Anything less than the full lifting of the sieges will never be enough and we cannot pretend otherwise.

Mr. President,

I will close by repeating what I and my colleagues have said many times: this crisis must end with a political solution, not a military victory. But, make no mistake as to the current humanitarian trajectory: despite some sentiment and even rhetoric within the international community, the available protection space is shrinking; humanitarian conditions are worsening, and the level of despair is rising. These cannot, must not become accepted trends to which the international community seemingly resigns itself as the search for a political solution continues. The international community has shown unity of purpose before and must show it again, before it's too late and we face the prospect of losing another generation of Syrians to conflict and misery.

Thank you.